

The Alchemy of Effort and Grace

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The Hope of Transformation

I live in New Mexico, and my favorite time of year here is the beginning of fall. It's not just the impossible blue skies, the cool, clear air, the explosive yellow cottonwoods, and the smell of roasting chili. It's the palpable feeling of change. You wake up in the morning and there's something electric in the air, something fresh and new, something that is just starting to become. The world is born again.

This is the same feeling that I sometimes get when returning from a good vacation or retreat. I return to my daily life with hope, with a sense of promise. I see that life is what I make of it, and that it just might be possible to slow down and be “perched a little more lightly on the globe.”¹

Changes such as these are renewing. But if we're paying attention, they also hint at a much more compelling possibility: genuine, deep transformation. This, of course, is the hope that lies at the core of the Christian experience. We die to the old self, as Paul put it, and rise to the new life of grace. Or as the old saying goes, “God loves me as I am, but God loves me too much to let me stay this way.” However much we may appreciate our life the way it is, the Christian pilgrimage calls us to change, grow, and ultimately, to be transformed. We not only seek continual maturation in this life, but we believe that it extends into the next, where we shall be transformed “from one degree of glory to another.” (2 Corinthians 3:18)

But what are we being transformed *into*? After all, not all change is healthy and good. Some who pursue a religious life transform dramatically, becoming judgmental towards others and increasingly paranoid about the evil world in which they live. Others become obsessed with self-actualization, chasing one spiritual high after another. Both are forms of spiritual change, but they are hardly healthy or holy.

Becoming Christ

In the Christian tradition, we are invited to transform not just generally, but specifically into Christ. We are asked to enter his world, to see with his eyes, to take on his values, to live as he lived. As Paul put it so boldly of those who had died to self and risen in grace, “We have the mind of Christ.” (1 Corinthians 2:16) And so we are transformed into a version of Jesus. In Christian transformation, our life becomes characterized, as Jesus’ is, by generosity, humility, prophetic fire, forgiveness, trust in God, purity of heart, and unconditional love.

As we are transformed in these ways, we affect others around us, helping the Spirit to build “the kingdom of God,” as Jesus called it, so that this world might more resemble the character of Christ. Transformation is not for our own enjoyment; it is so that we can more effectively participate in the redemption of all creation.

Change That Happens to Us

It’s fine to talk about these ideals of personal holiness and the transformation of the world, but the real question is *How?* How on earth are we transformed into Christ? How does real and lasting change happen? For we know, as Paul did, how frustratingly insistent our patterns of un-holiness are. “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not as I want, but I do the very thing I hate . . . Wretched man that I am!” (Romans 7:15, 24a) We can have a wonderful experience on retreat or vacation. We can read lofty sentiments such as mine, but when that kid of ours pushes our button for the hundredth time, we explode! When stressful demands at work pile up, our equanimity flies out the window.

One model of transformation relies almost entirely on divine intervention, and it assumes an instantaneous, and sometimes complete, change. This is often how conversion is described: “I was immersed in worldliness, running after women, drugs, and money, living the high life, not even knowing how miserable I was, when BAM! God stopped me cold with a heart attack. I realized that I had been living for nothing. My Christian friend came to see me in the hospital, and there I accepted Christ, and haven’t looked back since. I was lost and now am found.”

I can’t really knock this experience, as long as the new life is actually marked by a Christly character. In fact, it happened to me. In my

mid-twenties, I had grown increasingly restless and empty inside, not knowing where my life was headed. Due to a strange series of coincidences within the space of a couple of months, I quickly lost a long-term love, my apartment, my car, my work, even my sense of identity, and was stranded with nowhere to go. The only people who took pity on me and invited me to live with them was a Christian couple who had the odd practice of actually reading the Bible together, praying, and talking openly about their faith. (I had grown up in a staid suburban Episcopal parish.) I asked Christ to live in me, and have never looked back. I was transformed. Now of course, this transformation has had to continue for some thirty years (so far), but it was dramatic and effective when it began.

This is the transformation of Paul on the road to Damascus, knocked off his horse and temporarily blinded. It is the transformation of an alcoholic who one day walks away from a horribly destructive life, into the light of health and sanity. It happens to people because of a crisis, a powerful retreat, or just because we're unconsciously ready for God to slap us upside the head.

Miraculous, transformative intervention either happens or it doesn't. We can't sit around waiting for an epiphany. And yet this doesn't stop some from trying to manufacture one: straining to hear the life-changing voice of God in their heads, saturating themselves with emotional prayer by a crowd of prayer-warriors, or sweating it out in rigorous meditation until enlightenment is attained. When the breakthrough doesn't come, we are disappointed in ourselves (we don't have enough faith) or in God (who apparently doesn't care, or even exist).

Change That We Create

Then there is the kind of transformation that is planned and executed through our own efforts. It comes out of the business model. We see it today in programs to lose weight, get in shape, improve our effectiveness at work, build intimacy in our marriage, and yes, grow spiritually. We set overall goals, identify measurable objectives, and practice the seven steps promoted by the author or workshop leader.

I have not had much experience or success with this model of transformation, but I know that for some it seems to work at least at some levels. They realize that their lives are not going the way they want them to; they get some guidance from someone who can help them organize the chaos

of their lives, and they move, step by step, into a new way of being. A rule of life can function this way, as the practitioner gradually takes on a series of activities that he or she knows will bring positive results. My wife essentially did this on a recent vacation, re-plotting her normally distracted week into a format that would allow for quiet time every morning and painting in her studio for two uninterrupted days every week. Previous efforts such as this never worked for her, but this time the timing was right. The plan took hold, and she changed her life for the better.

But the planning/execution model doesn't always work. A well-planned rule of life can become the life-killing law that Paul warned about, a method of measuring our spiritual inadequacy when we fail to keep it perfectly (or worse, a source of smugness when we do). Sometimes we are not ready for change, needing instead to stew awhile longer in our unhappiness in order to learn a lesson at a deeper level. Sometimes we can't see what is best for ourselves, and so any plan we might come up with is worthless. There are times when even if we do know the direction forward, we keep bumping into a familiar roadblock that prevents us from progressing.

A Third Way

When God doesn't seem inclined to slap us upside the head with instantaneous transformation and when we can't transform ourselves through our own efforts alone, there is a third way available to us. It consists of a mysterious interplay of human effort and divine grace.

When I was growing up in California's Bay Area, every self-respecting teenager had to at least try to surf on occasion. What I remember most vividly about my occasional ventures into the surf is not an image of myself standing triumphantly upon the board, riding like King Kamehameha toward the shining sands.

I remember waiting peacefully, bobbing up and down in the water, watching the horizon as swells came in groups, wondering if this set was going to be The One. I remember turning towards shore, paddling hard (the boards were long and heavy in those days), only to fall back when I couldn't catch the momentum of the wave. I remember especially the glorious sensation when my vigorous strokes were magically met by the powerful surge beneath, lifting me up and forward. It was an amazing physical sensation, when, after having waited, discerned, tried, and failed,

suddenly my strength and the ocean's strength came together in a glorious alchemy.

So it is with spiritual transformation. We put in our time in prayer, we go to therapy, read books, talk to friends, offer ourselves in worship, and practice our rule of life. We paddle along by our own strength, trying to propel ourselves forward, hoping to catch a wave of freedom, compassion, simplicity, or intimacy with the divine. This is a good and essential part of the spiritual journey. "Work out your own salvation," Paul advised. (Philippians 2:12) Jesus encourages us to "strive first for the kingdom of God," to "strive to enter through the narrow door." (Matthew 6:33; Luke 13:24)

But there is also the waiting on grace. Woven in and out of our striving is another reality: we float in the deep waters, waiting, praying, watching the horizon. Interspersed with our efforts to change is a contemplative dimension, a kind of surrender, a dying to self. This is what Gerald May used to call "creating a little contemplative space" around things, a little breathing room for the Spirit when things are dense. In this contemplative space, we let go of our control, trusting that God is working beneath our understanding and our striving. We float, remaining awake, receptive, watchful.

Eventually the waters beneath us will surge. We receive insight, we hear as if for the first time a familiar passage of scripture, or a part of the old self just sloughs off like dead skin. Our seemingly unfruitful efforts to understand, to change, to move forward are met with an energy beyond ourselves, and we are taken forward.

In this process, effort and grace are not mutually exclusive or even sequential; they are simultaneous, overlapping.

When I was enduring what was, for me, an excruciating process of discernment about whether or not to stand for election as a bishop, I waited in the deep waters of unknowing for months. I prayed every day for guidance. The question was like a cloud, constantly hovering near me. Every time I tried to grab hold of the vapor, my hands would come up empty. Again and again, I had to surrender in faith.

At the very same time, I also made tremendous effort. I studied the history and theology of the episcopate. I talked endlessly to others who were in a position to know the reality of the office. I weighed pros and cons. I did my homework.

One day a good friend who was reading Thomas Friedman's best-seller said offhandedly "Brian, the world *is* flat, you know . . ." Suddenly

the waters surged beneath me, and I remembered something I'd always known, but which now became the moment of truth: being a diocesan leader is no higher or bigger or more effective in the kingdom of God than being a good priest, father, husband, friend, and writer. The world is flat. Transformed, I could return to the life I had been given with renewed clarity and passion. This only happened because I had endured a contemplative time that contained, paradoxically, both surrender and effort throughout.

Transformation does not usually happen to us by magic or simply because we will it into being. It happens because we try, we fail, we surrender, we wait, we try again, we get help, we let go, we beat our heads against the wall, we wait some more . . . and all the while, we do our best to trust that the Spirit is actually working harder than we are, beneath the surface of consciousness. Occasionally we catch glimpses of this graceful work, until finally, when the timing is right, it comes out into the open, all of our efforts are matched by the more powerful surge of grace, and we are carried forward.

What was previously impossible for us becomes possible. Our fear drops away like a rusty old ball and chain. We slow down without even having to apply the brakes. Our impulse towards others becomes more consistently patient, more generous. We look in the mirror, and *surprise!* we see the face of Christ.

Over the years, I have learned to trust that if I do my part, the Spirit will go to work as well. I may not be able to see this work for a long time, but as I continue to strive, there is always a part of me that knows God is moving beneath the surface. This enables me to do my part without the corrosive element of fear. I can hold my need for transformation lightly, knowing that in God's good time—in this life and the next—all shall be brought to fulfillment.

Alchemical Experiments

If you are accustomed to either waiting for God's intervention or planning your own self-improvement and you would like to try the alchemy of grace and effort, try one of the following experiments.

1. Pray every day about your need for transformation. Ask only two things: that God will be present and active in this situation; and that you will be shown your obstacles to transformation. Be patient and trust. Something will eventually shift.

2. Practice *Lectio Divina*—a meditative reflection on a short passage of scripture—with a story from one of the gospels. Ask yourself “In this passage, what does Christ ask of me? Can I do this today? If not, how do I need God’s grace in order to live in the way I am called to live?”
3. Practice Alcoholics Anonymous’ twelve steps to recovery. The first three steps invite us to surrender to grace (admit that our lives are unmanageable, believe that a greater power can restore us, turn our lives over to that power); and the remaining ones require our own effort (moral inventory, willingness to remove shortcomings, make amends, stay in touch with God, carry this message to others and live it daily).
4. If part of your work with other people involves creating change, consider how (or if) you and others:
 - a. Make efforts to effect change;
 - b. Try to force change when it doesn’t come at first;
 - c. And/or C. patiently, trustingly, attentively wait until some new breakthrough comes on its own, out of the mix. Try to practice (a) and (c), avoiding (b).
5. Go surfing, skiing, swimming, or kayaking down a river. Do anything that requires that you feel the physical tension between your own efforts and a force greater than you. Feel the interplay between the two. Find your balance. Then apply it to your spiritual life.



Note

1. As Peter Levi described monks in *The Frontiers of Paradise: A Study of Monks and Monasteries* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1990).